

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 060

CG 013 485

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TITLE Satisfaction With Family Relations Among the Elderly.
PUB DATE Oct 78
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, October 19-22, 1978); Best copy available
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Family Relationship; Gerontology; Institutionalized Persons; Interaction Process Analysis; *Life Style; *Older Adults; *Participant Satisfaction; *Perception; *Quality of Life; Research Projects

ABSTRACT

Perceptions of 160 institutionalized and 207 noninstitutionalized old people (mean age = 76.6 yrs.) were examined with respect to the quality of their family relations. Responses to six survey items measuring satisfaction with various aspects of family relations were cross-tabulated with gender, marital status, health status, age, and living arrangements to discern significant variations in satisfaction with family relations. Chi-square and gamma were employed as measures of significance and strength of association. In addition to measuring respondents' overall evaluations of their families, survey items assessed such factors as: (1) satisfaction with general treatment received from families; (2) the attention which families paid to the older person; and (3) the amount of love and affection received from their families. The majority (80%) of the respondents were generally satisfied with their family relations, with some significant differences existing between the married and the widowed as well as between institutionalized and noninstitutionalized respondents. (Author)

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SATISFACTION WITH FAMILY RELATIONS AMONG THE ELDERLY¹

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¹Revised version of a Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, Philadelphia, October, 1978.

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ED172060

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Abstract

Data were gathered from 160 institutionalized and 207 community-dwelling elderly concerning their satisfaction with various aspects of family relations. The majority (80%) of the respondents were satisfied.

Significant differences were found between the young-old and the old-old, the married and the widowed, as well as, between the institutionalized and community-dwelling respondents.

SATISFACTION WITH FAMILY RELATIONS AMONG THE ELDERLY

Introduction

Increasing attention is being focused upon the general situations, including the family life circumstances, of persons aged sixty-five and older. One particular consequence of the increases in the numbers and proportion of elderly persons has been a growing professional and popular concern with the quality of family life for multiple generations. Recent increases in the number of four-generation families have intensified this concern (Townsend, 1968).

Several authors have provided excellent reviews of the literature concerning the family relations of older people (e.g. Shanas and Streib, 1965; Troll, 1971; Berardo, 1972; and Sussman, 1976). ^{Pauline & Sussman, 1976} As might be expected, the research indicates that family ties are particularly salient for the elderly. Families function as an important resource by helping meet many of the social, emotional, economic, and health needs encountered in later life. Since familial relationships are relatively enduring, they are thus well situated to sustaining the individual throughout life (Treas, 1975). Moreover, families can provide the affection and companionship which other institutions are either not intended or are unable to give.

The modern modified-extended kin network appears to meet many of its older members' needs although it is often stereotypically characterized by infrequent interaction and low affect. Family satisfaction and solidarity apparently survive even in a mobile and rapidly changing society. For example, Sussman (1976;219) states that "The connectedness of most elderly members with their families and kin networks is unbroken despite industrialization and modernization... and the more recent emergence of new and variant family forms. . . ."

While numerous empirical investigations have explored family structure and functioning in later life (e.g., Lopata, 1978; Wood and Robertson, 1978; Stinnet, Carter, and Montgomery, 1972; Adams, 1968; and Petrowsky, 1976; Hill, 1970), few, if any, have specifically examined older people's subjective satisfaction with their family relations. There are data describing the extent of various types of intergenerational contact and exchange but comparatively little information is available concerning older persons' feelings about their family relations.

Methodology

The Research Problem and Hypothesis

The general purpose of this descriptive research was to empirically examine older persons' perceptions of the quality of their family relations. More specifically, the research problem was: 1) to assess the extent to which elderly respondents endorsed six statements describing their relations with family and 2) to discover key variables associated with their opinions on these statements. It was hypothesized that endorsements of all six survey items would be independent of the respondent's marital status, age, gender, place of residence, and health.

The Sample

The data reported herein are part of a larger study conducted by the Texas Department of Human Resources (DHR) to evaluate its alternatives to institutional care programs. Data were collected by interviews in the spring and summer of 1977 from a random sample of DHR clients. The present research analyzes completed interviews schedules which were obtained from 151 institutionalized and 208 non-institutionalized respondents. All respondents were recipients of some service

from DHR and all were classified as similar in terms of their levels of physical and economic needs, although some were living in nursing homes while others were not. Mean age was 79.8 years. Sample characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 About Here.

Operational Measures

Satisfaction with family. Six survey statements were employed to assess respondents' satisfaction with various aspects of their family relations. The six items are as follows:

1. I am perfectly satisfied with the way my family treats me.
2. I think my family is the finest in the world.
3. I get as much love and affection from my family now as I ever did before.
4. I wish my family would pay more attention to me.
5. My family is always trying to boss me.
6. My family does not really care about me.

Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Agreement with items 1, 2, and 3 indicated satisfaction with family relations while endorsement of the remaining 3 items indicated dissatisfaction.

Marital status. This variable was dichotomized into married and non-married categories with the latter including the widowed, divorced, separated, and never marrieds. The majority ^(61%) of the 289 non-marrieds were widowed.

Health status. Self-assessed health was employed as the operational measure of health status. Respondents subjectively rated their health as either good or poor in response to the question, "Overall, how do you feel?"

Age. For analytical purposes, this variable was dichotomized at the mean, thus creating categories of less than or equal to 80 and greater than or equal to 81 years of age. In this way it was possible to distinguish between the "young-old" and the "old-old".

Living arrangements. All respondents lived in a nursing home or in some type of private residence, either their own or that of a relative or friend. They were thus dichotomized into institutional and non-institutional categories. Regardless of their living arrangement, however, all respondents had been classified into identical levels of physical and economic need by DHR, as was noted earlier.

Analytical Technique

Responses to the six items measuring satisfaction with family relations were cross-tabulated with marital status, health, age, living arrangement, and gender to discern possibly significant variations in the elderly's satisfaction with their family relations, and to test the research hypotheses. Chi-square and gamma were employed to measure significance and strength of association, respectively.

Findings and Discussion

The findings presented in Tables 2 and 3 indicate that a majority of the respondents were rather satisfied with their family relations, i.e., at least 81% of the total sample endorsed each of the three items reflecting satisfaction while no more than 32.2% endorsed any of the remaining three dissatisfaction items. Also, on the satisfaction items some significant differences existed between the married and not married, the institutionalized and non-institutionalized, and between the young-old and the old-old, thus calling for rejection of the null hypothesis for these items (See Table 2). Since no such differences were found on the three negative statements, the null hypotheses for them were accepted. These points are elaborated below, first for the satisfaction items, then

for the dissatisfaction ones.

Table 2 About Here.

Satisfaction Items

The three items expressing satisfaction with family relations received strong endorsements. Responses to each of these items are discussed in this section and are presented in Table 2.

Treatment by family (Item 1). A large majority of the respondents (88%) said they were "perfectly satisfied" with the treatment they received from their families. A significant difference was found between the "young" and "old" with the older respondents being more likely to report "perfect satisfaction." Responses were undifferentiated in terms of marital status, health, gender, and living arrangements.

Family finest in world (Item 2). Consistent with the findings for the first item, 87% of all respondents believed their family was "the finest in the world." The marrieds were significantly more likely than the non-marrieds to endorse this item, as were the old compared to the young-old. Also, the non-institutionalized were more likely to agree than were those residing in nursing homes. This may suggest a shift in the perceptions of family as a result of institutionalization; i.e., the family is not as "fine" if it allows an older member to be institutionalized. At the same time, however, it must be emphasized that over 81% of the institutionalized respondents nevertheless believed their family was the finest in the world.

Love from family (Item 3). Over 81% of the respondents reported receiving as much love and affection from their family as they ever had before. Age was significantly related to endorsement of this statement with the old-old being more apt to agree. Also, the

non-institutionalized were more prone to agree than were their institutionalized counterparts. This, as was suggested for the preceeding item, could indicate a redefinition of ones' family after institutionalization. Or, it may be that the institutional respondents were relatively isolated from their families, thereby making it more difficult for them to receive as much love and affection as they had prior to their entering the nursing home. Again, however, it should be emphasized that 75% of the nursing home respondents reported receiving as much love as ever before.

Dissatisfaction Items

Table 3 presents the extent of endorsement for the three statements representing dissatisfaction with their family relations. Distinct minorities of the respondents agreed with these items, although, 32.3% did wish that their families would pay more attention to them. Very few (15.9%) felt their families did not really care about them, while only 15.3% reported that their families tried to boss them. Thus the respondents seldom reported dissatisfaction with their family relations. Furthermore, responses to the three dissatisfaction statements were independent of marital status, health, age, gender, and living arrangement. Thus, the null hypotheses were ^{not} rejected.

Table 3 About Here.

The findings strongly suggest that older persons surveyed are especially satisfied with their family relations and that they do not feel abandoned and neglected as the stereotypes often imply. There are at least two possible conclusions based on these findings. The most apparent one is that these older people simply are quite satisfied with their family relations. There may, however, be more to the story. For example, there might have been a tendency for

respondents to exaggerate the positive aspects of their family relations. That is, they may have been reluctant to endorse the dissatisfaction statements in order to project a more favorable image to the interviewers. It might, for example, have reflected adversely on the older persons if they were to have stated that their families did not really care about them.

There are two important cautions in interpreting the findings. First, this study did not assess the actual behaviors of the respondents' families. Thus, some persons who endorsed the satisfaction items might enjoy extensive contact and exchange with family members while others who endorsed the same items might have very limited dealings with their families while being just as satisfied. One individual might be quite content under circumstances another would find unpleasant. Secondly, "family" was not precisely defined in the six survey items, thus it was unclear as to whom the statements referred, e.g., to offspring only, to siblings, or to fictive kin. Moreover, the imprecision of subjective definitions for "family" and personal satisfaction must not be overlooked in interpreting the findings.

Implications for Counseling and Education

The aging of the American population will continue to have profound repercussions for family functioning. Family interventionists should, of course, anticipate problems stemming from this development. Such problems might involve intergenerational relations, mutual aid patterns, living arrangements, long term hostilities, and the like (Seelbach, 1978). Counselors must be prepared to assist in achieving and maintaining high levels of family satisfaction in light of the pressures exerted by increased numbers and proportions of older persons. There will certainly be a demand for family counselors

especially trained in the needs and problems of the elderly. Hence, a new counseling speciality is emerging.

Family life educators must continue and extend their efforts to prepare laypersons as well as professionals for the realities associated with an aging population. For example, topics such as the aging family, the post parental, and the retired family can no longer be omitted or even de-emphasized in family life textbooks and courses. Additionally, there is an increasing need for public awareness of these issues. Hence, educators must develop a variety of training programs focusing upon the interrelated circumstances and needs of older persons and their families. The challenge is clear; it remains for family life educators and counselors to energetically expand their efforts to meet the family-related needs created by an aging population.

Implications for Family Policy

Family functions have traditionally been categorized into instrumental and affective domains. While both are important, the present study focused on the latter and found that older persons were generally satisfied with the social and emotional treatment provided by their families. Family policy must work hard to maintain this satisfaction given the expanding demands placed on family members in modern society. Non-familial demands upon younger family members' time and money as well as upon their physical and psychic energies compete with the older person and tend to diminish the amount of those resources which are available to them.

As noted earlier, growing pressures on individuals and families should be anticipated as a consequence of the recent increases in the number and proportions of older persons. Hopefully, the govern-

mental, economic, and health care institutions will be prepared to effectively meet the needs of an aging population at the individual, interpersonal, as well as social levels. If so, family relations will accordingly be strengthened at each of those levels. Furthermore, if family policy will attempt to guarantee that older persons' instrumental needs are met, families might then be able to concentrate upon meeting the affective-emotional needs of elderly as well as younger family members. If for example, a son is relieved of the responsibility of providing homemaker services and economic assistance for his parents, he might be more effective in meeting their affective needs. Government institutions and public policy should remain aware of this. Unfortunately, many bureaucratically organized "helping" institutions (through their inflexibility, impersonality, and "red tape") sometimes create additional emotional or affective troubles even as they attempt to satisfy the instrumental needs of elderly clients. In sum, family policy should be committed to insuring that older persons' satisfaction with their family relations will remain at least as high as those reported in this study, despite the advancing bureaucratization of society.

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Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample

<u>Living Arrangements</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Nursing Home	151	42.1
Non-Institutional	208	57.9
<u>Gender</u>		
Male	88	24.5
Female	271	75.5
<u>Health</u>		
Good	165	46.9
Poor	187	53.1
<u>Marital Status</u>		
Married	70	19.5
Not Married	289	80.5
<u>Ethnicity</u>		
Black	94	26.2
White	265	73.8
Age Range	60-99	
Mean Age	79.8	
Education	6.4	

Table 2. Percentage Endorsing Statements of Satisfaction with Family Relations By Selected Variables

Independent Variables

Statement	Marital Status		Age		Gender		Residence		Health		Total
	Married	Not Married	≤ 80	≥ 81	♀	♂	NH+	Non NH++	Poor	Good	
1. I am perfectly satisfied with the way my family treats me.	94.3 (66) $\chi^2 = 2.44$ $G = -.436$	86.6 (240)	84.4 (157) $\chi^2 = 4.73^*$ $G = .393$	92.5 (149)	84.5 (71) $\chi^2 = 0.99$ $G = .212$	89.4 (235)	85.1 (126) $\chi^2 = 1.82$ $G = .246$	90.5 (180)	89.6 (163) $\chi^2 = 0.36$ $G = -.129$	86.9 (139)	88.2 (306)
2. I think my family is the finest in the world.	95.7 (67) $\chi^2 = 5.01^*$ $G = -.602$	84.7 (233)	83.2 (154) $\chi^2 = 4.17^*$ $G = .355$	91.3 (146)	84.5 (71) $\chi^2 = 0.33$ $G = .134$	87.7 (229)	81.6 (120) $\chi^2 = 5.61^*$ $G = .385$	90.9 (180)	89.0 (161) $\chi^2 = .89$ $G = -.177$	84.9 (135)	87.0 (300)
3. I get as much love & affection from my family now as I ever did before.	88.4 (61) $\chi^2 = 2.36$ $G = .328$	79.4 (220)	75.1 (139) $\chi^2 = 8.79^{**}$ $G = .424$	88.2 (142)	79.8 (67) $\chi^2 = 0.05$ $G = .062$	81.7 (214)	76.4 (113) $\chi^2 = 3.47$ $G = .269$	84.8 (168)	80.1 (145) $\chi^2 = .33$ $G = .100$	83.1 (133)	81.2 (281)

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

+ Nursing Home

++ Non Nursing Home

Table 3. Percentage Endorsing Statements of Disatisfaction with Family Relations
By Selected Independent Variables

Statement	Independent Variables									
	Marital Status		Age		Gender		Residence		Health	
	Married	Not Married	≤ 80	≥ 81	♀	♂	NH+	Non NH++	Poor	Good
4. I wish my family would pay more attention to me.	28.6 (20)	33.2 (92)	36.0 (67)	28.0 (45)	40.5 (34)	29.7 (78)	34.5 (51)	30.7 (61)	33.5 (61)	30.0 (48)
	$x^2 = 0.36$ $G = -.108$		$x^2 = 2.22$ $G = .184$		$x^2 = 2.93$ $G = .234$		$x^2 = 0.40$ $G = .087$		$x^2 = 0.34$ $G = .081$	
5. My family is always trying to boss me.	12.9 (9)	15.9 (44)	12.4 (23)	18.6 (30)	13.1 (11)	16.0 (42)	15.6 (23)	15.1 (30)	18.2 (33)	11.9 (19)
	$x^2 = .21$ $G = -.124$		$x^2 = 2.10$ $G = -.235$		$x^2 = 0.23$ $G = -.118$		$x^2 = 0.000$ $G = .022$		$x^2 = 2.19$ $G = .247$	
6. My family does not really care about me.	10.0 (7)	17.4 (48)	17.2 (32)	14.4 (23)	21.7 (18)	14.1 (37)	19.0 (28)	13.6 (27)	13.7 (25)	17.0 (27)
	$x^2 = 1.76$ $G = -.309$		$x^2 = 0.33$ $G = .106$		$x^2 = 2.20$ $G = .257$		$x^2 = 1.51$ $G = .200$		$x^2 = 0.46$ $G = -.125$	
	Total									
	32.3 (112)									

+ Nursing Home
++ Non Nursing Home